

# Biography of Mary Shelley

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“I am by birth a Genevese, and my family is one of the most distinguished of the republic” (Shelley 80). So begins the narrative of Dr. Frankenstein, the title character of Mary Shelley’s most famous work, a story that assured Shelley’s place in literary history. She was only a teenager when she wrote *Frankenstein*, unaware of the string of tragedies and personal losses that would frame her life narrative. Despite the multiple self-acknowledged challenges to her sanity and creativity, she would later write five additional novels and an eclectic group of articles, travel narratives, stories, essays, and a drama for children.

Mary Shelley was born in London in 1797 to acknowledged radicals William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft. Infamous for her refusal to conform to traditional expectations, Wollstonecraft wrote the early, crucial feminist work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), arguing for formal education for girls. Both parents would strongly mark Mary’s writing, although she never knew her mother; Wollstonecraft died from an infection eleven days after the birth. However, Mary would read her mother’s works later and became close to her illegitimate half-sister, Fanny Imlay, loved by Godwin as well. Devastated by Wollstonecraft’s death, Godwin attempted to restore her reputation in his book, *Memoirs of the Author of ‘A Vindication of the Rights of Woman’* (1798). He achieved the opposite effect, as he detailed Wollstonecraft’s suicide attempts, affairs, and facts about her illegitimate daughter. The account shocked the public, destroying any standing Wollstonecraft retained, her reputation unrestored until the twentieth-century feminist movement (Mellor 1–4).

Always living beyond his means, Godwin, a declared atheist and anarchist, made a scant living as a journalist, political philosopher, and novelist (Mellor 7). His most well-known books, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793) and *Things as They Are; or,*

*The Adventures of Caleb Williams* (1794), later served as models for Mary's depiction of social (in)justice in at least two novels. Godwin attracted a following as a cornerstone of philosophical political revolution. While deeply grieving for his wife, he assumed care of Mary and Fanny. Godwin sought family and financial stability in 1805 by remarrying to Mary Jane Clairmont, whom Mary would find an unsympathetic stepparent (Mellor 12–13). The Godwins bought and lived above a children's bookshop. Writing as Edward Baldwin, Godwin also published children's books.

In 1812, letters to Godwin arrived from an admirer named Percy Bysshe Shelley. The family learned that at Eaton College, Shelley's behavior distinguished him from fellow privileged students. He refused the traditional role of servant to the older boys and was bullied for his lack of interest in games and his high-pitched crying. He moved to University College, Oxford, from which he was expelled in 1811 for publishing the pamphlet *The Necessity of Atheism*. The University offered reinstatement for repudiation of his blasphemous views, but he refused. On August 28, Shelley eloped with sixteen-year-old Harriet Westbrook. All of this activity estranged Shelley from his father, Sir Timothy Shelley, and theirs would remain a strained relationship (Mellor 18–19).

By 1814, Shelley was an occasional guest in the Godwin home, as were many literary and philosophy luminaries, from whom Mary could learn. Shelley's wife had given birth to a daughter and was pregnant again, but, by March, Shelley and sixteen-year-old Mary had begun a passionate courtship. First resisting Shelley, Mary eventually found him mesmerizing; he reportedly wooed her as she read at her mother's grave. In July, they eloped to Europe, leaving Percy's wife, daughter, and later a son, born a few months later in November (although the boy's paternity was never assured). Percy and Mary's elopement and the abandonment of his family caused great scandal. In addition, Claire Clairmont, Mary's emotional stepsister, accompanied them, also engaging in scandalous behavior. Despite personal beliefs that challenged civic and religious law, Godwin was incensed by Mary's actions, and he interpreted Shelley's conduct as a personal betrayal. Although demanding

money from Shelley, Godwin refused direct communication with his daughter for years (Mellor 17–22). According to Mary’s journal entries, the social condemnation surprised her, but her father’s rejection proved particularly painful. In February 1815, Mary gave birth to a premature daughter, Clara, who died soon after. By 1815, Shelley had a steady income from his grandfather’s estate, and he sent Harriett an annuity.

As the couple traveled, like her mother, Mary published an 1817 travelogue in which she criticized many fellow travelers. Her *History of a Six Weeks’ Tour* also contains journal entries and letters to Fanny. Her keen skills of observation while living abroad influenced the international settings of Mary’s future fiction (Mellor 24–26). However, neither she nor Percy “considered her . . . talent . . . equal to his” (23).

Despite ongoing personal drama, including involvement with Claire, Percy began writing some of his era’s greatest poems, promoting his reputation as part of the Romantic movement. His personal circle included individuals crucial to practice of the romantic ideal, such as George Gordon Byron, Sixth Baron Byron, also a poet and an outcast due to various indiscretions, including rumored sexual relations with a half-sister and separation from his wife. On January 24, 1816, William Shelley was born. That summer, the notorious group moved to Lake Geneva in Switzerland. Claire Clairmont was pregnant with Byron’s child, Allegra. Byron never confessed love for Claire and later separated from her. Mary described Claire’s reaction to the gothic literature the group read as “Jane’s horrors” (Mellor 25–27). A lifelong friendship fraught with challenge, including Claire’s constant presence, developed among Byron, Percy, and Mary (Mellor 33–37).

The origin of Mary Shelley’s first and best-known book, *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* (1818) remains familiar legend. On a rainy evening, after Mary; Percy; Claire; Byron; and Byron’s physician, Polidori, had been reading German ghost stories, Byron challenged everyone to write their own ghost story. After days without inspiration, Mary developed her story of Dr. Victor Frankenstein, his monstrous creation, and the fatal results. Mary’s

1831 preface to a later edition of her novel described the nightmare that inspired *Frankenstein*:

When I placed my head on my pillow I did not sleep, nor could I be said to think. My imagination, unbidden, possessed and guided me, gifting the successive images that arose in my mind with a vividness far beyond the usual bounds of reverie. . . . I saw the pale student of the unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together. I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine show signs of life and stir with an uneasy, half-vital motion. [...] His success would terrify the artist. (58–59)

Some critics argue that Mary's details are exaggerated, based in part on the description of her dream. Its details appear organized and logical, unlike those of a typical nightmare. Still, the story of the novel's creation builds suspense and makes an appealing narrative and introduction.

In September 1816, Percy and Mary returned to England. Within three months, the couple lost both Fanny and Harriet to suicide. Fanny checked into a hotel in Swansea and overdosed on laudanum. She wrote in a note that she decided she should “put an end to the existence of a being whose birth was unfortunate, and whose life has only been a series of pain to those persons . . . endeavoring to promote her welfare” (qtd. in St. Clair). In December 1816, reportedly despondent and pregnant, Harriett drowned herself in the Serpentine River, near Hyde Park at age twenty-one. Harriet's death freed Percy to wed Mary on December 30.

Mary completed *Frankenstein* in 1817, publishing it in March 1818; soon after, Mary and Percy's daughter, Clara Everina was born. After living in London and mending their relationship with Godwin, the Shelleys moved to Italy. Clara died in Venice of dysentery in September, and in December, Percy was listed as the father of “Elena Adelaide,” born in Naples. Whether Shelley fathered or intended to adopt the child to replace Clara remains undetermined, but the child never joined the family and died in June 1820 (Sunstein 181–82). Three-year-old William Shelley died of malaria on June 7, 1819,

leaving Mary childless and emotionally exhausted. She suffered a mental breakdown, exasperated by Percy's affairs and lack of attention. However, her only child to survive his parents, Percy Florence, was born in November (Mellor 141–44).

Mary continued to write, despite her grief. In 1819, she completed *Mathilda* and presented rights to any profits from publication to Godwin in response to his continuous requests for money and “emotional manipulation” (Mellor 194). Because *Mathilda*'s focus is a father's incestuous passion for his daughter, Godwin did not publish it, fearful that he would be imagined a model for the father. It was finally published in 1959.

Tragedy next struck the Shelleys on April 19, 1822 when Allegra Byron died in an institution where Byron had placed her; Claire was livid and inconsolable (Sunstein 212–13). The Shelleys moved to San Terenzo with friends Edward and Jane Williams, with whom Shelley spent much time, renting a house in a rugged area that Mary reportedly abhorred. On June 16, 1822, Mary suffered a final miscarriage; Percy packed her in ice to staunch her bleeding, saving Mary's life (Mellor 144–47). Mary had suffered a fragile emotional and mental state for months, telling friends that Shelley lost interest in his family, and the loss of yet another child intensified her feelings. Her feelings would later cause her great guilt, following Shelley's death (Mellor 146–47).

On July 1, Percy Shelley sailed to Leghorn to visit his friend Leigh Hunt, along with Edward Williams in his boat, the *Don Juan*. During their July 8, 1822 return, the boat sank, and Percy Shelley drowned at age twenty-nine. According to Richard Holmes, Shelley was a good sailor on a river, but he lacked experience on ocean water. Mary spent several anxious days with Jane Williams, as they awaited the inevitable. Their husbands' bodies were found on July 15 (Sunstein 219–20). According to one report, “The boat went down so quickly that [Captain] Williams did not have time to kick off his boots . . . the bodies cast up along the coast 10 days later . . . could be identified by their clothes, but not by their faces” (qtd. in Holmes).

Devastated, Mary followed Italian law and cremated Percy Bysse, returning his ashes later to England for burial (Sunstein 226).

Edward Trelawney, another Shelley confidant, pulled Shelley's heart from the fire and gave it to Mary. Threatened by lack of income and facing a widow and single mother's life at age twenty-five, Mary turned to the inner circle for support. Byron promised a loan, but later reneged (Mellor 151). In 1823, Sir Timothy Shelley promised Mary and her son support, if she would give the child to "guardians in England" (Sunstein 236, 471). Incensed at the suggestion, Mary rejected the offer and sought support through writing. In 1823, *Frankenstein* went into a new edition, for which Mary received a sizeable advance. Her historical novel, *Valperga: or, the Life and Adventures of Castruccio, Prince of Lucia* (177) was published, but its income had been promised to her father (Sunstein 211–12).

On July 24, 1823, Byron and Trelawney moved to Greece to join the fight for independence against Turkey. Mary departed for England and continued correspondence with Trelawney. Sir Timothy at last offered Mary an allowance for his grandson, on condition that it would be repaid (Sunstein 244). She spent time in Paris, enjoying dramatic productions of *Frankenstein* and developing a few close friendships as her publishing career flourished (Sunstein 252, 470). That winter, she began her futuristic novel, *The Last Man*; all six main characters would be admitted by Mary to represent Shelley, Byron, and members of their circle. After falling ill, Byron died on April 19, 1824 at age thirty-six (Sunstein 256). Mary wrote to Byron's lover that time would help heal her wounds of loss, signaling recovery from her own grief. Mary focused on Percy Florence, but she remained determined to promote her husband's reputation, publishing *Posthumous Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley* in June. Sir Timothy objected and threatened to withdraw Mary's allowance, but did not do so (Sunstein 257, 260–61). Mary received and declined at least one marriage offer (Mellor 181).

In January 1826, *The Last Man* received tepid reviews, while a French dramatic rendition of *Frankenstein* received an enthusiastic response and was translated into English. Mary visited Jane Williams, at that time in a relationship with the Shelleys' friend, Thomas Jefferson Hogg. In September, Percy and Harriet Shelley's fourteen-year-old son, Charles Bysshe, heir to Percy

Shelley's grandfather's fortune, was struck by lightning and died, and Percy Florence became his father's heir (St. Clair 472). He received a regular income, easing Mary's financial concerns. While the relationship with Sir Timothy also eased, he continued to block publication of Percy's poems until his death in 1844.

By 1827, Mary Shelley's short stories and essays appeared in various venues, especially *The Keepsake*. Fiercely private, she was devastated by Jane Williams' betrayal, as she spread rumors of Mary's "mistreatment" of Shelley before his death (Sunstein 280–81). Mary did not confront Jane until the following year, at that time temporarily severing their relationship. Several friendships remained constant, and in 1829, she clandestinely assisted Cyrus Redding to publish a French edition of Percy Shelley's poems. Her father-in-law did not discover her involvement, and she received an increase in allowance. She published *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck* (1830), a heavily fictionalized tale about the pretender to the English throne (Mellor 177). She also published several short stories and reviewed William Godwin's *Cloudesley* in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*. The following year, the edition of *Frankenstein* with which readers are most familiar appeared, and she severed relationship with the periodical *Westminster Review* when editors refused her review of an Edward Bulwer novel. When Percy Florence began school in Harrow, she relocated there (St. Clair 492). In 1834, Mary learned her publisher lost more than thirty pages of the manuscript of her novel, *Lodore*. She rewrote them within a few months, and it was published in 1835, along with two volumes of biography, *Lives of the Most Eminent Literary and Scientific Men of Italy, Spain and Portugal*.

Mary Shelley cared for her father until his death in London on April 7, 1836, following his eightieth birthday. She mended her relationship with Jane Hogg and became godmother to Jane's daughter. In 1837, Mary published her sixth and final novel, *Falkner*, and Percy Florence studied at Trinity College, Cambridge. In 1839, she published Percy Bysshe Shelley's poetry collection, *Queen Mab*.

Although none of Mary's last five novels had the impact of *Frankenstein*, they remained part of the critical discussion of

English literature. She continued to write stories; articles; and, in 1838 and 1839, two volumes of *Lives of the Most Eminent Literary and Scientific Men of France*. In 1844, she published *Rambles in Germany and Italy*. Following Sir Timothy's death, Percy Florence inherited his title and the Shelley fortune (St. Clair 492). Mary ended her career with her continental travels with Percy Florence. Her struggle to maintain dignity in the face of personal attack continued, as a man claiming to be Byron's son made a thwarted attempt to blackmail the Shelleys. Three years later, Sir Percy Florence Shelley married Jane St. John, and Mary developed a positive relationship with Jane (Sunstein 378–79).

By 1848, Mary suffered early symptoms of what was believed to be a brain tumor. The disease was diagnosed in December 1850, and after suffering a mysterious paralysis, she died in London on February 1, 1851 (Sunstein 380–83). Mary was buried with her mother and father. Percy and Jane Shelley ordered the bodies of Mary's parents to be exhumed and buried them with Mary in the churchyard of St. Peter's, Bournemouth (St. Clair 493–94). After Mary's death, Percy Florence could not bear to enter her house or let anyone touch her things. It was only a year later that Mary's desk was opened. Among the items found were locks of her dead children's hair and a copy of Percy's poem *Adonais*. One page was folded around a silk parcel containing some of his ashes and the remains of his heart (Sunstein 384–85).

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